

Residual Medievalisms: Historical Pageants in Eastern Bavaria

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In his 2015 study, *Medievalism: A Critical History*, David Matthews proposes that, after a period of modernity during which medievalism appeared in some of the central cultural practices in the western world, much of the medievalist energy and excitement visible in canonical texts, architecture, and the arts gradually diminished from the general domain and concentrated around the various institutionalized forms of inquiry of medievalia at the modern university.¹ As a result, medievalism was displaced from the central cultural position it held during Britain's Victorian or America's pre- and post-Civil War periods to an increasingly marginal one. Matthews declares that this move to the margin ironically rendered medievalism almost omnipresent, albeit in smaller doses and with lesser consequence. Matthews terms this kind of medievalism "residual," remarking how medievalism now left its mark no longer with the lead genres, authors, and texts of its time as in the works of Alfred Tennyson, Walter Scott, William Morris, and Thomas Carlyle, but as mere substrates, implications, and references as in James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot, or Ezra Pound, or as mere tropes in twentieth-century genre fiction by Umberto Eco, John Fuller, and Barry Unsworth. Similarly, Matthews expounds, there are no English-language medievalist movies that have achieved both popularity and won sufficient cultural capital to be thought of as canonical.

Matthews has a point: during the nineteenth century (peaking between the 1850s and the 1870s) the study of medieval texts and art progressively passes from the hands of antiquarians, bibliomaniacs, dilettantes, and enthusiasts into those of university-educated specialists; and during the nineteenth century movements such as the English Medieval Revival or the French Catholic Revival dominate certain subsections of cultural production; and also during the nineteenth century terms such as *medieval*, *Middle Ages*, and *medievalism* enter into the vocabulary of those numerous scholars who would now historicize the past. However, as I was reading Matthews' chapter, I could not rid myself of the impression that the distinction between "central" and "residual" medievalism he is writing into existence is mostly a function of his tacit agreement with the theory that, at least by the end of the "Great War," the acceptance and adaptation of medieval ideas and teleologies became too complex, if not downright impossible. Following Michael Alexander and Alice Chandler, he confirms that medievalism had a "boom" in the nineteenth century, that it "had lost its vitality before the lives of its remaining practitioners came to an end in the 1890s."² According to Matthews, then, the aftermath of this boom is the reason why J. R. R. Tolkien created an "infantilized" version of the Middle Ages, often "on the edge of bathos" and "about the lives of satirically small people" in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* instead of the serious epic and "high-art vision" of English mythology he intended to write.³ The end of the "boom" can also be seen in T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land*

¹ A more concise version of this essay is forthcoming as chapter 3 (pp. 39-51) in Richard Utz, *Medievalism: A Manifesto* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications; Bradford, UK: ARC Humanities Press, 2017).

² David Matthews, *Medievalism: A Critical History* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2015), 121.

³ *Ibid.*, 138.

which, while beholden to the Arthurian legend, also draws on Sophocles, Ovid, the Bible, Shakespeare, Donne, and Baudelaire. Another example is the painter J. W. Waterhouse, a late pre-Raphaelite whose work shows clear indebtedness to various medievalist themes. However, as Matthews underlines, he is just as indebted to classicist, Biblical, and orientalist themes and fascinated, like many late Victorian painters, not only with medieval history, but “with history itself.”⁴ Matthews summarizes:

The general tendency [...] is one in which medievalist art forms have fallen outside normative canons of value and medievalist art has not regained the distinction conferred on it in the mid-Victorian period. The canonical status achieved for medievalism in that period in the spheres of art, architecture, and poetry was [...] an exception – in Britain at least, it was medievalism’s bright shining moment. Subsequently, medievalism was transmuted by modernist poetry, and it is perhaps in contemporary poetry more than anywhere else that its high-art ambitions are fulfilled today: in the verse of Seamus Heaney and Geoffrey Hill, for example, and the creative translations and adaptations (in the wake of Heaney’s *Beowulf*) of Simon Armitage (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the *Alliterative Morte Arthur*, with *Pearl* to follow) and Lavinia Greenlaw (*Troilus and Criseyde*).⁵

What is most surprising about this passage is not Matthews’ undisputable claim of a boom time for medievalist activity in art, architecture, and poetry during the mid-Victorian era, but that he seems to posit what he calls medievalism’s “high-art ambitions” as the measuring rod for its centrality or marginality. Matthews does admit that “medievalism outlasted modernism and adapted, eventually to take the place it currently holds in postmodern popular culture, where its presence in a range of cultural forms today is easy to detect—especially in films, computer games, graphic novels, music (from folk to heavy metal), heritage and tourism.”⁶

If I did not know Matthews’ previous work, I could very easily read this passage as suggesting that medievalism can only ever be said to be central to a culture when that society’s cultural elite is involved in originating medievalist works of art. The way Matthews describes the lower-level remnants of medievalism’s Victorian “boom,” postmodern popular culture sounds dangerously close to what Hans Naumann once defined as “gesunkenes Kulturgut,” the kind of low-brow and merely imitative borrowing or copying by socially inferior strata of superior and original cultural productions springing from the upper social strata and intelligentsia. Naumann’s theory, which originates out of folklore studies right after the end of the nineteenth century, looked down on such borrowings as ignorant and ‘degenerated’ misunderstandings of their superior models.⁷

⁴ Ibid., 121.

⁵ Ibid., 138-9.

⁶ Ibid., 122.

⁷ See Hassan El-Shamy, “Gesunkenes Kulturgut,” in: *Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Beliefs, Customs, Tales, Music, and Art*, ed. Thomas A. Green, vol. 1 (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 1997), 419-23.

Nothing could be further from Matthews' mind. He mentions in his study that he has gleaned his specific semantics of "residual" from Raymond Williams's *Marxism and Literature*.⁸ Based on Williams' keywords, "medievalism may be," so Matthews, "within a given phase of a culture, dominant, emergent, or residual," "a cultural formation 'effectively formed in the past, but ... still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but an effective element of the present.'"⁹ Channeling Williams further, Matthews states that he is specifically interested in whether "this residual cultural element has an 'alternative or even oppositional relation to the dominant culture,' or whether it 'has been wholly or largely incorporated into the dominant culture.'"¹⁰ He then suggests that medievalism's impact in any culture might actually be at its most pervasive when it is residual, i.e., fragmented, but omnipresent, rather than dominant, i.e., central and canonical, but limited to the social and intellectual elite.

In what I would like to see as a medievalist intervention in the traditions in the region in which I was born, raised, and educated, I would like to complicate David Matthews' observations by confronting them with medievalisms occurring in cultural contexts substantially different from the British framework informing his study. Medievalisms in the geographical area comprising post-1871 Germany include various and well-known nationalist and nativist incarnations. However, due to the long-term particularist histories dominating the German-speaking world, regional folk customs, often linked with religious traditions, co-exist alongside the more generally known national medievalist discourse from the late nineteenth more than into the first half of the twentieth century. These regional histories, often rooted in the medieval past, are not always easily traceable, but often continue as thought patterns, mentalities, and rituals that resist even the most radical social and political upheavals, including two world wars and their accompanying pervasive social and political changes.

Several times every week I speak with my mother back in Germany via FaceTime. At the age of 88, she suffers from any number of age-related health issues, but all of them seem to be exacerbated by abrupt changes in weather conditions. One of the ones she will mention at least once every month is a weather condition she variously calls the Ostwind (Easterly wind) or *der Böhmishe* (short for: the Bohemian wind) which, whether by changing barometric pressure or the electrification of the atmosphere, she blames this for a deterioration in her symptoms, including high blood pressure and severe back aches. What I find fascinating about her attribution of these instances of deterioration is that they always originate from a vague eastern origin and that they seem to invoke, in her voice and my own reception, a deeper and darker danger that is part of an ineffable but nevertheless traceable collective memory my mother, her neighbors, and many inhabitants of her region share. Above and beyond its existence as a scientifically established weather pattern, a katabatic wind similar to the

⁸ See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

⁹ Matthews, *Medievalism: A Critical History*, 19.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Adriatic *bora* or the Californian *Santa Ana* winds, the “Bohemian” or “Easterly” wind seems to be a cultural and well as a meteorological phenomenon. And as a cultural phenomenon, it stands for a century-long fear of foreign invasions from the East.

I participated in this narrative of vague fear of the east when serving in the German army as an eighteen year old, stationed in a garrison securing the German border toward Communist Czechoslovakia. Unlike Sarah Palin, we could see the Russian tanks across the no-man’s land only a few miles away. During this military service, I was “volunteered” to participate as a lay actor, dressed in a medieval soldier’s garb, in what may well be Germany’s oldest continuing open air folk pageant, the City of Furth im Wald’s *Drachenstich* (*Spearing of the Dragon*; www.drachenstich.de). Similar to the medieval Corpus Christi procession from which today’s pageant and play originate, my fellow soldiers and I would walk through the city center streets performing fake sword fights. The play itself features a romantic story between a brave knight who saves a damsel in distress by killing the incarnation of evil, a dragon which, standing for a never fully explained threat of ravaging war threatening from the dark border forests of the East and perhaps related to the teachings of the church reformer John Huss, invokes the spearing of the dragon by St. George.

The version of the play performed in 1932 was written by a man by the name of Eugen Hubrich (1885-1963) who, as teacher, teacher educator, and active member of the Bayerische Wald-Verein (1883-), an association celebrating and creating regional identity and advocating for economic support for the relatively poor population in the Bavarian borderlands. Already prior to Hitler’s takeover of power, Hubrich had published poetry that contained the ingredients of the borderland ideology and stressed the sacrifice of the region’s inhabitants and their role in defending German national identity. Then, in 1933, he openly advocated for the construction of refuge huts for hikers along the Czechoslovak border, calling them “Stamm- und Trutzburgen” (“family seats” and “castles constructed for the siege of an enemy castle”) for “Germanity” and inviting his readers to think about ways of uniting with the Sudeten Germans living on the Czech side of the border. As the most potent unifying practice he encouraged the singing of songs that “warm the heart with German homely sounds” (“Heimatlaut”). In the same year, he published the panegyric poem “Heil Hitler,” which reads (in my translation):¹¹ “Deep there in the Bohemian Forest, / Where people love their home, / And will give up property and life for their home, / Germany’s wakening call turns into the cry for a savior, / Heil Hitler today and forever, / Heil Hitler especially when there is danger.” The connectivity between these texts demonstrates how effortlessly border-regional nativist identity and pseudo-Christianity (the text invokes well-known prayers of intercession to the Virgin Mary) could be integrated with the national-socialist glorification of a leader-savior who would free the German nation from the eternal eastern threat of its Slavic neighbors which Hitler had mentioned as early as 1924 in *Mein Kampf*.

¹¹ All quotes in this section on Hubrich are from Albrecht Bald, “*Braun schimmert die Grenze und treu steht die Mark!*” *Die NS Bayerische Ostmark/Bayreuth 1933-1945: Grenzau, Grenzlandideologie und wirtschaftliche Problemregion* (Bayreuth: Bumerang, 2004), 219-22.

In 1934, on the invitation of Joseph Filbig, the Nazi mayor of Amberg, who wanted to mark the 900th anniversary of the city's first recorded mention, he wrote the text for an open air pageant entitled *Amberger Blut*. The pageant centers around the lavish wedding festivities for Margarete, daughter of Duke Ludwig IX of Bavaria, with Philip the Upright, Elector Palatine of the Rhine, in 1474, and performed in front of the late medieval Gothic City Hall. In the foreword to the play, Hubrich stylized Philip's adoptive father, Count Friedrich, as an indisputable allegorical predecessor of Adolf Hitler, a leader who unites a disjointed country, battles down unjustified bourgeois resistance, increases prosperity, keeps non-Arians out of higher education and most businesses, so that everyone can see in these medieval historical events the prefiguration of (in his own words: "the dawning") of Hitler's Germany.¹² My parents, both born in Amberg, and 13 and seven years old in 1934, may well have been witnesses to the widely advertised events surrounding the heavily advertised pageant and the pageant itself. They were more than witnesses in 1954, when the former Nazi major became mayor of Amberg once again, this time democratically elected with 64% of the vote as candidate for the right-wing party *Deutsche Gemeinschaft*. Both my parents, like many other citizens, dressed in handmade premodern garb to populate the main square, and my father, a music teacher, directed one of the choirs providing the musical portions of the performance.

In 1935, Eugen Hubrich, now advanced to the position of a NSDAP district warden for cultural affairs, wrote perhaps his most famous pageant, *Die Agnes Bernauerin zu Straubing*. For this play and festival, the goal was again the creation of regional and national identity, in this case the 500th anniversary of Agnes Bernauer, a fifteenth-century figure widely memorialized in Bavarian and German literature and art. Born around 1410, she is believed to have been the daughter of an Augsburg citizen, and became the lover, perhaps even the wife, of Count Albrecht III of Bavaria. The most common narrative assumes that Albrecht's father, Count Ernst, disapproved of his son's mésalliance with a woman of lower social status and had her drowned in the Danube river. One of the many Nazi messages inserted in Hubrich's version of the Agnes Bernauer story is a rebuke of Count Ernst's notion that the outcome of his son's relationship with Agnes would produce a "bastard" offspring: His son's answer is: "He who has German blood running through his veins cannot a bastard be."¹³ And Agnes herself, right before her death, prophesies "Faith will live on, even if we perish," an unambiguous reference to a famous dictum ("Germany will live on, even if we perish") by Heinrich Lersch, a famous worker poet and among the 88 poets and writers who vowed total obedience and loyalty to Adolf Hitler in 1933. At the premiere of the pageant in 1935, the audience sang a song referring to the Hussite danger threatening Bavaria from the East. Then, the leading NSDAP regional magistrate reminded the audience of the impending Bolshevik threat from the Slavic peoples to the East. And in a 1937 performance, after the final song of the choir, a loud and joyous "Alleluja!" was replaced with the more up-to-date "Heil, Deutschland, Heil!"

¹² Eugen Hubrich, *Amberger Blut: Festspiel zur 900-Jahrfeier der Stadt Amberg*, ms, 1934, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek.

¹³ All quotes on *Die Agnes Bernauerin zu Straubing* are from Bald, "Braun schimmert die Grenze und treu steht die Mark!", 219-22.

Hubrich's medievalism reveals itself as a situational practice that will invoke continuity as well as discontinuity with the Middle Ages as needed to promote specific ideological goals. While he is eager to show how the contemporary Nazi rule has replaced all medieval class- and status-based privileges by a simple national affiliation based on common German "blood," he writes the following about his intentions with the pageant on Agnes Bernauer:

To bring back to life the Castle of Straubing with its contemporary (medieval) inhabitants, to make Agnes Bernauer speak and act there as a real person, means an interweaving of destiny with the place in which the destiny happened, means the fulfillment of the word in blood and soil. The great-grandchildren should feel what their ancestors have felt in the same location. However, they should also realize how Agnes was sacrificed as a member of the Volk, devoured by the gruesome Middle Ages, but that she may be resurrected in purity at a happy moment in time, during which the renewal of blood and morals by the Volk is realized from within its deepest and earliest origins. (my translation)

The staying power of Hubrich's plays was considerably enhanced by the pageant genre for which he wrote. The participation of large numbers of citizens joining in the reenactment of the medieval and early modern historic moments, the presence of actual historical buildings serving as *lieu de memoire*, and the inclusion of ritual and musical elements all contributed to his productions' performance long after the end of the Third Reich. *Amberger Blut* was revived during the conservative Amberg backlash against denazification in 1954, and his play about Agnes Bernauer continued to be performed in more and more expurgated versions until 1989. Hubrich remained in charge of the various revisions to the play until his death in 1963.

Hubrich himself spent about one year in prison for his rather central role in the NSDAP, but was allowed to reenter his profession as a teacher after he served his time, and he focused his post-war poetic production on non-political regional, dialectal, and religious texts. His most famous work is the text to composer Ferdinand Neumaier's composition of the *Waldlirmesse* (Mass written for [a] resident[s] of the Bavarian Forest), which is even today one of the most popular and widely sung and played public events in Eastern Bavaria. While denied the official status of a Catholic mass by the religious authorities, it is most often performed during events happening at the interstices of official Catholic ritual and secular, often folksy, festivities. It contains no direct support for Nazi ideology; it is also difficult to read it as a text dedicated to the Catholic liturgical tradition. However, the text seems to affect piety and suggests an almost pantheistic nature mysticism, within which God only exists as some kind of impersonal eternal principle or cosmic force.¹⁴ Perhaps more significantly, the text, which celebrates premodern rural life and associates meaningful speech and

¹⁴ My description of the *Waldlirmesse* follows the analysis by Maximilian Seefelder, "Wie erkennt man (mangelnde) Qualität? Eine Werkanalyse am Beispiel der Waldler-Messe," *Studententagung zur Kulturarbeit in Niederbayern an der Universität Passau am 12. Juli 2003: Vier Vorträge* (Passau: University of Passau, 2004), 13-26.

agency with taciturn, truthful, and independent farmers surrounded by primeval forests, is indebted to the very border country ideology that became a political program during the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich and added cultural significance to a meteorological phenomenon, the darkly threatening Bohemian or Eastern wind. In fact, Hubrich's "Waldlirmesse" and songs about the famous Bohemian wind continue to appear together on numerous Bavarian music compilations. Its reception attests to the fact that he once again created just the right tune, the "Heimatlaut" ("homely sound") he already recommended to the Sudeten Germans in the Bohemian border country in 1933.

What can we learn from this example of residual regional medievalism? Does it really matter whether residual medieval cultural elements have an alternative or even oppositional relation to the dominant culture, or have been wholly or largely incorporated into the dominant culture, as David Matthews asks? This quick foray into the history of medievalist open air pageants in Eastern Bavaria would indicate that residual medievalisms are as resistant to change as we know other mentalities and collective memories to be. As an epistemological semi-conscious, they have continued to produce meaning during the (second) German empire, the Weimar Republic, the Third Reich, the Federal Republic of Germany, and contemporary Germany. That this is possible either means that David Matthews' distinction is not as relevant as he thinks it is or, and this is my hunch, that the political and social changes between the late nineteenth century and the early twenty-first century were not as clear cut and momentous for the general population as historians of ideas would claim. This suggests to me that as intellectuals we have an ethical obligation to intervene publicly to expose ideologies that would otherwise continue unopposed under the guise of seductively vague invocations of the medieval past.